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ABSTRACT

A proposed 3-year project in Albany, New York will train 90 senior citizen volunteers to work in rural special education classrooms and with handicapped children and their parents in the children's homes. The project goal is the creation of a network of training systems and personnel to assist schools in improving special education services. Volunteers will attend a 10-week training session of 30 instructional hours and will have a practicum of 30 hours in a special education classroom and in children's homes. Volunteers will receive credit in the Retired Senior Volunteer Program. Selected volunteers will receive additional training as trainers for new volunteers. Benefits to participating schools and children will include help in complying with P.L. 94-142 (the Education for All Handicapped Children Act), increased staff-to-student ratio, more individual attention, consistency of training between school and home, and assistance to teachers. Benefits to volunteers and the community will include civic contributions for public education, increased awareness and understanding of handicapped populations, and community involvement in planning and delivery of services to the handicapped. (LFL)

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Preservice Training of Senior Citizens as Special Education Volunteers

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Paper presented at the Fifth Annual National Rural Special Education Conference in Bellingham, Washington, 1985.

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ABSTRACT

The three year project described herein has as its basic goals the training of senior citizens to serve as volunteer aides in special education classrooms. This proposal, therefore, will address two important issues: the utilization of volunteers and the shortage of special education personnel. Benefits of this project accrue to children with handicapping conditions, families of these children, special education teachers, public schools, the capital district community, and the senior citizen volunteers.

The project proposes to train a total of ninety volunteers, five to ten of whom will serve as trainers of other volunteers to work in special education classrooms. Volunteers will receive training in a variety of areas ranging from an overview of exceptional children to instructional methodology and working with parents. Training will be provided to the trainees in formal classes to be conducted both in the public schools and on the College of Saint Rose campus. In addition, trainees will attend a practicum or on-site experience in a special education classroom and in the children's homes as part of an out-reach component to the project to assist parents in working with their handicapped children at home.

The project's methodology is designed to have a multiplicative effect, i.e., the preparation of senior volunteers who will have the skills needed in order to train other potential volunteers. A project such as this could serve as a model for others to follow and result in a network of training systems and personnel to assist school systems in serving handicapped children.

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INTRODUCTION

Consequent to the enactment of P.L. 94-142 in late 1975, the New York State Legislature passed Chapter 853 of the Education Laws of 1976. The resulting amendments to the part 200 Regulations of the Commissioner of Education pursuant to the Education of Children with Handicapping Conditions initiated a state plan and a series of processes to assure a free and appropriate education for all children between the ages of five and twenty-one within the state. During the past seven years, New York State's more than two hundred local educational agencies in concert with the State Education Department have demonstrated a commitment to not only the letter of the law, but, more importantly, to the spirit of the federal mandate. Commencing with Project Child Find and using the BOCES network as a vehicle for identification, unserviced children with handicapping conditions were soon receiving a free public education in the least restrictive environment.

Concommitant with this, the State Department of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities and the State Department of Mental Health began their own processes of deinstitutionalization resulting in the return of additional children with handicapping conditions to their home communities to receive a public education in the least restrictive environment.

P.L. 94-142 generated a spirit of optimism for parents and professionals and all who were concerned with the education of handicapped children. In New York State it resulted in an increased public awareness of and commitment to the needs of these children. In concert with the spirit of the least restrictive environment concept, resource rooms were expanded; programs for severely/multiply handicapped and autistic children were developed; support personnel, e.g., occupational and physical therapists, speech therapists,

music and dance therapists, behavior therapists and adaptive physical education teachers were hired by LEAs; and classroom paraprofessional aides were hired to increase the ratio of staff to pupils. Each of these actions was needed in order to provide individualized education programs in less restrictive public school settings.

Finding funds for supportive services including paraprofessional classroom aides is a major problem that must be faced by special education. The problems become even more cogent in the rural communities where smaller schools and a lower tax base make it difficult to provide aides in all special education classrooms. A high ratio of staff to pupils is an important variable in the ability to provide individualized education programs to these children in less restrictive settings. Classroom aides have permitted the educator the opportunity to provide these programs. Special education, like other areas of human service, will need to depend increasingly upon volunteers to fill the void created by our ever shrinking fiscal resources. The U.S. Office of Education's Bureau for the Education of the Handicapped has implicitly already recognized the value of and need for training volunteers to work with handicapped children as evidenced by the inclusion of this area as one of its funding priorities. In June, 1984, the U.S. Office of Education sponsored a policy agenda conference dealing with partnerships in education with particular emphasis on rural settings. We feel that this proposal is in keeping with the administration's agenda of involving communities and citizens as partners with schools in the education of children.

Volunteerism is not a new phenomenon in special education. Student and parent volunteers have been present in special education classes for many years. However, there still exists a reluctance on the part of some special educators to accept volunteers into their programs due to the time and effort

needed to train these people to assume a productive role in the classroom. Therefore, this project has, as its basic goal, the preparation of trained classroom volunteers.

PRINCIPAL OBJECTIVES: This project will accomplish the following principal objectives:

(1) To train senior citizen volunteer trainees to work with children with handicapping conditions in public school special classes.

(2) To train senior citizen volunteer trainees to work with children with handicapping conditions and their parents in the children's homes.

(3) To train senior citizen volunteer trainees to act as trainers of other volunteers.

(4) To allow school districts to continue to meet the spirit of P.L. 94-142 by providing a full complement of personnel in the classroom.

SUBORDINATE OBJECTIVES: This project seeks to accomplish the following subordinate objectives:

(5) To improve community attitudes toward children with handicapping conditions

(6) To establish a network of volunteers to serve the needs of children with handicapping conditions in the capital district's schools.

(7) To increase community support for special education in the public schools.

PROJECT BENEFITS

The benefits of this project are several but the most important is that to be accrued by children with handicapping conditions. This project will initially provide ninety trained volunteers to work directly with these children both in the schools and in the homes. It will increase the ratio of staff to student thus enabling the special education program to provide truly individualized education programs and instruction to children. This is particularly needed in the rural communities in which smaller school districts experience difficulty in funding support services, particularly aide positions. Individualized attention should enable the handicapped children served to show improvements in cognitive skill acquisition, social behavior and psychomotor performance. This should result in their ability to move into less restrictive environments, e.g., the achievement of increased mainstreaming opportunities. A related benefit will be to assist these children in the home by having the volunteers, where appropriate, work with the child's family to provide consistency in training from the school to the home setting. Thus, not only will the child benefit, but the family as well.

Schools will benefit from the project by being able to provide paraprofessional support services. Trained volunteers can assume the role of adjunct teachers and assist teachers in a variety of tasks ranging from taking attendance to instructional tasks such as providing individualized reading instruction.

The volunteer participants would benefit by having an opportunity to receive training and thereby make a civic contribution of their leisure time. They will be able to add to their ability to make a needed contribution

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to their own communities. The project will enable the volunteers to become acquainted with the schools and thus result in their increased support for public education. The project proposes to educate participants with respect to the nature and needs of handicapped individuals and thus to increase their sensitivity toward and understanding about these populations. An increase in positiveness of attitudes should accrue. The volunteers will also receive a certificate of training from the College of Saint Rose which recognizes their skills in working with and dedication toward children with handicapping conditions. Senior citizen volunteers will be able to apply their volunteer contribution toward earning RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program) credit which is publicly recognized annually by this body.

Finally, the community at large will benefit through increased awareness about children with handicapping conditions. Each of the volunteers belongs to one or more social, civic, religious, professional and community groups, i.e., they each interact with others in the community.

The benefits of this project have been discussed above in terms of the personnel to be trained and those handicapped individuals to benefit from the services of the trainees. A project such as this could serve as a model project for other schools, agencies, and institutions to follow. Training materials will be shared with other agencies in order to facilitate the training of a variety of volunteers to work with children with handicapping conditions.

With the most highly successful trainees becoming trainers of other senior citizen volunteers, coupled with the development of training modules, there will exist a catalyst and a nucleus for the future development of a network of volunteer training systems and personnel for special education in the capital district of New York State.

PROCEDURE

During the first year of the project, thirty senior citizen volunteer trainees (age 60 and above) will be selected from the towns of Colonie, Berne, Knox, Westerlo, and Schoharie. The directors of Senior Citizen Services and Programs from each of the respective towns have agreed to assist in the selection of trainees for the project. Trainees will participate in a ten week training session which will be conducted on-campus and in the public schools one morning per week for three hours for a total of 30 hours of instruction. The thirty participants will be divided into two groups of fifteen each for training. Each group will receive a thirty hour parallel training program. In addition, trainees will attend an on-site experience in public school special education classes, half to be located in urban-suburban settings and half to be located in rural settings. Participants will attend the on-site setting for three hours per week for ten weeks for a total of thirty hours.

Volunteer trainees will be selected during the summer of 1985. Criteria for selection will be a commitment on the part of the trainee to (1) want to work with handicapped children, (2) be willing to attend the training sessions, (3) be willing to attend the on-site public school experience, (4) spend some time working with the child in the home, and (5) consider acting as a trainer of others. Participants will be interviewed by the project staff prior to selection and queried with respect to the above stated commitments.

During the summer of 1985 a variety of planning activities will take place. Initially, a project advisory committee will be formed and will consist of a representative of the New York State Office for the Aging,

the Assistant Superintendents or Chairs of the Committees for the Handicapped from the participating school districts, the College's Dean, a special education teacher, a parent of a handicapped child, and three senior citizens.

The Advisory Committee will meet periodically throughout the duration of the project. It will assume responsibility for assisting in the development of the training curriculum and in program monitoring. Commitments have already been received by individuals representing each of the constiuencies to serve on this committee.

Other major planning activities will include the development of the training curriculum, the development of formal and informal assessment instruments, the selection of trainer consultants, the selection of a project secretary, the procurement of training classrooms at the College and in the public schools, the screening and identification of special education programs for on-site experiences, the scheduling of trainees, the selection of special education classes for the trainees to pursue their volunteer work after training is completed, and the identification of children and homes for the trainees to pursue outreach work. During the ten week training period, trainees will be assessed and monitored by the project director in conjunction with the special education personnel in the field. During the remainder of the first year of the project, the project staff and school personnel will continue to monitor the progress and activities of the trainee volunteers in their respective work settings and plan a train-the-trainer program for the second year of the project.

The preparation of selected trainees from the first year of the project to serve as adjunct trainers to assist the College consultants in the training of thirty new volunteer trainees will be the focus of the second year of the project. Under the supervision of the project director and training consultants, the selected trainees will attend classes on the College of Saint Rose campus. Trainers will be trained to assist in both the preparation of project participant trainees as well as to return to their senior citizen clubs, centers, civic and church groups to train other volunteers to work with handicapped children in educational settings. Trainers will be instructed in teaching methodologies designed to enable them to teach others how to use the curriculum and training modules in which they had been previously trained. The train-the-trainer phase of the project will begin in June 1986 and will run for six weeks for a total of eighteen hours of classroom instruction.

Also during the summer of 1986, the project director will arrange for additional on-site experience sites, classrooms for trained volunteers and outreach sites for the remainder of the second year of the project. New volunteer trainee participants will receive thirty hours of classroom instruction and thirty hours of on-site experience during the fall of 1986. In the Spring of 1987, the thirty new volunteers would be placed in public school special education settings and home outreach sites. The second and third years of the project will follow the model developed and employed during the project's first year.

The major difference between the first and second year of the project will be the involvement of selected senior citizen volunteers to serve as trainers of new project participants. The senior citizen trainers will work directly with college faculty consultants in the training of other

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volunteers.

The third year of the project will duplicate the process employed in the first two years. At the conclusion of the three year project, a total of ninety volunteers will be trained to assume volunteer positions in special education classes in the capital district. Between ten and twenty of these individuals will be trained as trainers of future volunteers. It is anticipated that local school districts throughout the capital district will perceive the benefits of this program and would express an interest in utilizing the trained senior citizen volunteers and the training curriculum from the project to train other volunteers from within their own communities to work in their schools. School districts have expressed an interest in potentially funding this type of training in the future.

A secondary major activity for year three would be the analysis of the data generated over the three year period. The data would be analyzed and the findings reported and presented and shared at national forums such as the annual conventions of the Council for Exceptional Children, American Council on Rural Special Education, and the American Educational Research Association.

Knowledge and contact with handicapped individuals should improve attitudes toward this population. Assigning trainees to special education classes should (1) re-acquaint them with the public schools; (2) help them to gain an understanding of special education and mainstreaming; and (3) provide them with the opportunity to apply theories, strategies and procedures acquired during training. This should result in more positive attitudes toward handicapped individuals.

EVALUATION PLAN

The following outcomes will be assessed as part of the project's evaluation plan:

A. Participants' attitudinal change toward children with handicapping conditions.

B. Changes in participant knowledge about the nature of handicapping conditions.

C. Knowledge of strategies/procedures for working with children with handicapping conditions in classroom/training settings.

D. Performance of participants during the on-site field experiences.

E. The quality/effectiveness of training sessions.

F. The effectiveness of the trainers.

G. The effectiveness of the training modules/curriculum.

H. Participants perceptions of their own performance.

I. School district personnel evaluation of the project.

This project involves many constituent groups with diverse interests. Each of these group's are vital to the project's success. In order to ensure success, the groups were asked to provide input into the project and to have representation on an Advisory Committee during the life of the project. Senior Citizens Organizations, local school districts, local politicians, parents of handicapped youth, State officials, school teachers, and local school organizations contributed to the planning of this project. The involvement in planning and continued input should result in the project becoming a community owned project.

This ownership is vital if the project is to continue and become a part of the community's effort to deliver effective educational services to the handicapped. If the College is the only owner of the project, then its life will not be sustained once funding ceases.

This paper has described a project which should result in handicapped youth in rural areas receiving better educational services. The resources exist in the community, the need is present, all that remains to be done is to set the resources into motion in order to meet the need.